



*The  
Individualist  
Sensibility*

*by Georges Palante*



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## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

*In the human species every individual has to be studied and fathomed for himself.*

--Schopenhauer, *The World As Will and Idea*, Book 2, Section 26

The individualist tradition has roots at least as far back as ancient Greek philosophy. Where it has appeared it has always constituted an alternative voice to the dominant currents of thought which appeal to social cohesion and obedience. In the nineteenth century, that age of the great socialist ideologies, individualism raised a voice of protest against these dragons that made no secret of their ambition to swallow the individual forever. Writers like Stendhal, Max Stirner, and Friedrich Nietzsche rose to the challenge, pleading the cause of the individual.

Georges Palante, a humble schoolteacher in rural France, trailed shortly behind in their footsteps, writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, and pushed their conclusions even further. This book explores the mindset and temperament behind what he calls the "individualist sensibility". To bring out its contours and contrasts, he places his individualistic conception in dialogue with several themes: friendship and social intercourse, the ironic approach to life, and the once-fashionable doctrines of "immoralism".

But it's not as heady and theoretical as it sounds: as someone who distrusted all dogmatism, preferring lived experience to rational formulas, Palante's arguments are lavished with personal experience, anecdote, examples from novels, and specific practical suggestions for living the authentic life in a society that, at its best, doesn't care about you as a person. And personally, as a parent of two young children: i.e., as a co-founder of a new micro-society which will, in time, necessarily become suffocating to some extent, I've found reading and meditating on Palante a challenging, eye-opening, and ultimately beneficial experience.

Georges Palante is an important addition to the libertarian canon; his influence has been limited by his unavailability in English: this effort constitutes the first full length English translation of any of his books.

## AVANT-PROPOS

I have undertaken here to study a few aspects of the individualist sensibility and some intellectual attitudes that are close to individualism, such as immoralism and anarchism.

The title of this book indicates the absence of any dogmatic concerns. One can only formulate the *placita* of a particular sensibility which has no ambition that its preferences should be universal.

So individualism has no missionaries. It has no value for itself unless it is a personal sensation of life.



## THE INDIVIDUALIST SENSIBILITY

The word *individualism* can refer, either to a social doctrine, or to a form of sensibility.

Economists and politicians use it in the first sense alone. Economic individualism is the well-known doctrine of non-interventionism, of *laissez-faire, laissez-passer*. Political individualism is the doctrine which reduces the State to the single function of external defense, and internal security; or rather that which advises decentralization (regionalism and federalism), or even that which defends minorities against majorities (liberalism) and finds itself led by logic to take in hand the cause of the smallest of all minorities: the individual.

Psychological individualism is something else entirely. — Doubtless, there may be a link between doctrinal individualism and sentimental individualism. For example, Benjamin Constant was an individualist in both senses of the term. One may be a doctrinal individualist and fail to have the individualist sensibility to any extent. For example: Herbert Spencer.

The individualist sensibility can be defined negatively. It is the opposite of the sociable sensibility. It is a willing of isolation and almost misanthropy.

The individualist sensibility is by no means the same thing as vulgar egotism. The banal egotist wants to get ahead in the world, and will gleefully push anyone out of his way. This is a crass sensibility. All social contacts, falsehoods, and pettiness do it no harm. It swims through that milieu like a fish in the sea.

The individualist sensibility presupposes an intense need of independence, of honesty with oneself and with others, which is only a form of mental independence; a strong need for discretion and delicacy that comes from an intense awareness of the barrier between selves, which makes them incommunicable and intangible to each other; no less often it presupposes, at least with the young, the enthusiasm for honor and heroism that Stendhal calls *Espagnolisme*, and the sentimental elevation that led one of the same Stendhal's friends to rebuke him, saying: "You're stretching your nets too high." These intimate needs, which are always offended at their first contact with society, force this sensibility back in on itself. It is Vigny's sensibility: "An extreme sensibility, suppressed in childhood by teachers and in the army by the higher-ranking officers, kept to the most secret chamber of my heart." This sensibility is outraged by the pressures that society imposes on its members: "Society," says Benjamin Constant, "is too powerful, it reproduces itself in too many forms, it adulterates with too much bitterness any love that it has not sanctioned..." And elsewhere:

*"The astonishment of young people that society could be so artificial and so elaborate is more demonstrative of a natural heart than of a wicked mind. Besides, this society has nothing to fear from him. It weighs so heavily on us, its mute influence is so strong, that it immediately presses us into its universal mold. We are no more surprised than we were to begin with, and we feel at ease in our new shape, the way one ends by breathing freely at a show, huddling among the masses, even though it took great effort to breathe at the start... If some are able to escape the generalized destiny, they keep their dissent hidden away; they glimpse the seeds of vice in these absurdities; they cease to joke about it, since contempt has replaced mockery, and contempt holds its tongue."*

Stendhal's *Espagnolisme* bristles at the vulgarities and hypocrisies of his petty bourgeois milieu in Grenoble. A little later, in Paris, with the Daru, he expresses the same horripilation:

*"In this salon I have suffered cruelly, while receiving an education from others, from which my parents had so wisely sheltered me... Polished sorts of people, the ceremonious kind, even today freeze and reduce me to silence. And if they show any hint of religion or preaching on the great principles of morality, I die off. Judge the effect of this venom for yourself when, on January 1800, when it was applied to brand new organs, whose extreme tension retained every drop of it."*

With Amiel we see the same internal outrage, but with him it is even deeper and more intimate:

*"Perhaps I have been disfavored by emancipating myself from all favor. It is likely that I have disappointed the public's rage by withdrawing, in my outrage. I know that the world, so determined to shut you up when you wish to speak, is infuriated by your silence after it has taken away your desire for words."*

And so it seems that we should see the individualist sensibility as a reactive sensibility in the sense Nietzsche gave to this word: that is, it is conditioned by its reaction against a social reality to which it cannot or will not bend. Does that mean that this sensibility is not an impulsive one? Not at all. It certainly is, in the sense that it carries with it an inner reserve of emotional needs, which, repressed by the environment, becomes a desire for isolation, a proud resignation, an indifferent renunciation, irony, contempt, social pessimism, and misanthropy.

But this misanthropy is of a special kind. As the individualist is born with instincts for sincerity, delicacy, enthusiasm, generosity, and even tenderness, the misanthropy where he seeks refuge is liable to shades, hesitations, restrictions, and, perhaps, remorse. This misanthropy, pitiless as to groups, — which

are hypocritical and cowardly by definition, — is happy to spare individuals: those, at least, in whom the individualist hopes to find an exception, a “difference”, as Stendhal puts it.

Hostile to all “social things” (Vigny), closed off to the corporative and solidarist affections, the individualist keeps his door open to all elective affections; he is quite capable of friendship.

The dominant trait of the individualist sensibility is, in effect, an appreciation of human “difference”, of the uniqueness of persons, — The individualist loves this “difference”, not only his own, but in others also. He is bound to recognize it, to take it into account, and to revel in it. But it takes a refined and nuanced intelligence. Pascal said: “The greater intellect one has, the more originality one finds in men. Ordinary people find no difference between men.” The sociable or gregarious sensibility is content with the ordinary traits; it prefers “being like everyone else”. The Christian, humanitarian, solidaristic, and democratic sensibility would love to erase all distinctions between selves. Amiel rightly sees there the index of inferior intellect: “If, as Pascal says, to the degree we are more developed, we are more distinct, we cannot say that the democratic instinct develops the mind very much, since it leads us to believe in equality of merit by virtue of similarity of pretension.” The Christian says: “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” To which Shaw, that moralistic dramaturge, so wittily replies: “Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same.”

All the great individualists have this trait in common: love for and cultivation of human difference and uniqueness. “Every man’s head,” says Vigny, “is a mold where a whole mass of ideas is molded. Once this head is broken in death, it’s no use trying to gather its like again; it is ruined forever.” Stendhal says that every man has his own way of hunting his own happiness. This is what we call his *character*. “I conclude from this memory, which is still very present for me, that in 1793, forty-two years ago, I went hunting after my happiness precisely as I do today; in more common terms, my character was absolutely the same as it is today.”

Benjamin Constant draws this practical conclusion from the feeling of his uniqueness:

*“When I consider my situation, I tell myself that I must act in line with my needs and my character; to do otherwise would be dishonest. We only know ourselves very well. Between others and us there is an invisible barrier; only the illusions of the young are able to believe in the possibility of its disappearance. It always rises again.”*

It's plain that Stirner didn't invent the feeling of uniqueness, even if he coined the word. This feeling blends with the very feeling of individuality. To be an individualist is to be happy with the feeling, not even of one's superiority, but only of one's "difference", of one's uniqueness. — And that in all situations, even the most opposite or even terrifying ones. — There is a class of people who, victims of bad luck, and ashamed of the fatuous rabble (this truly is a comfort), involved in one of life's impasses, where extreme despair is ready to pounce on them, at this very moment find new exhilaration, along with pride in the feeling of their self, who would not trade their self for another one, lucky as some other self might be with respect to fortune or mankind. — The individualist places all his value and all his good not in what he has, nor in what he represents, but in what he is.

The uniqueness of the self is not without immediateness. — Into the feeling of individuality there enters, as the essential ingredient, the sensation of fluidity, of the instability of this self which is yet so personal. This also is a characteristic trait of the individualist sensibility. Benjamin Constant and Stendhal represent sensibilities which are simmering, shifting, evasive even for themselves, and often disconcerting for others.

Same goes for Amiel, in whom this sentimental impressionability always tries, and sometimes fails, to get rid of its stoic trappings.

By this sentimental impressionability, the individualist represents the opposite of what is called a "character", "a man of principle". —And, since his intelligence grows out of his sensibility, the individualist's intelligence is, like his sensibility, shifting, impressionistic, artistic, refined, capricious, and nuanced. From this comes the superiority of the individualist's intellect by comparison with the intellectual poverty and narrowness often noted in those we call "characters". Édouard Rod has somewhere pointed out the frequency of this psychological combination: an "imbecile" and a "character".

The two elements that constitute the feeling of individuality, uniqueness and instantaneity, seem irreconcilable, to a certain extent. Truly, uniqueness means consistency, at least relatively; immediacy means fluidity, absolute fugacity. Does the feeling of individuality not vanish into immediacy? — In truth, this opposition is no more than theoretical. In fact, the feeling of individuality combines these two elements by reconciling them at each instant of its existence. On one hand, Schopenhauer is right to say that our individuality follows us everywhere and puts its tinge on all of life's events: on the other hand, Stirner is right when he says that the Unique one is a creature of immediacy. But each of these states of immediacy, rolling along like a series of images on film, all share a common tint, a single emotional coloration. It is enough for us to recognize ourselves. It is enough for the feeling of our individuality to become possible. Stirner's absolute immediacy

is an exaggeration and a psychological untruth. A truly absolute immediacy would exclude all feelings and all cultivation of human “difference”, as well as every notion of uniqueness.

The individualist sensibility inevitably comes into conflict with its society. The tendency of the latter is, in effect, to reduce, as far as possible, the sense of one’s individuality: its uniqueness by conformity, its spontaneity by discipline, the self’s immediacy by a spirit of consistency, its sentimental sincerity by the insincerity inherent in every socially defined function, its self-confidence and pride by the humiliation that comes with all forms of social education. This is why the individualist has a sense of a silent struggle between himself and society. He refuses to be its dupe; he refuses to be buried under prejudice. “I have always seen,” writes Sainte-Beuve, “that, if we took a single minute to speak our minds, society would collapse.” Stendhal says: “Society has made no concessions for me; why would I make any for it?” — At the same time the individualist has a strong sense of the difficulties of evading society; Benjamin Constant says:

*“Every day convinces me that one must manipulate life and men almost as much when we want to escape from others as when we want to turn them to our purposes. Ambition is much less insane than we like to think; for, living in peace requires almost as much effort as it takes to rule the world.”*

Stendhal praises those who, in their lives, “have no more interest in commanding than in obeying.” — A hard line to hold. Society will not overlook this whim of yours. It will say: “You must either command or obey, or rather both at the same time. You must hold your rank and play your part.” Individualism is a way to escape, a way to close one’s gates, to protect one’s true self; it is the proud isolation of the individual within the fortress of his uniqueness; it is a secession of both heart and mind. Happy to escape from society, the individualist keeps aloof from its favors; he blames himself alone for his lack of social advancement. And this brings him neither remorse nor regret. As Stendhal says:

*“I have spent ten years in this salon, I have been politely received, shown due respect, but I have felt less connection with it day by day, only with my friends. This is one of my character flaws. This flaw means that I can blame my lack of advancement on no man... I content myself with an inferior post, and feel most content when I am a hundred leagues from my superior, as I am today. ... I am not a sheep, and for this reason I am nothing.”*

The individualist sensibility is accompanied by an intellectuality that is hostile to every doctrine of social encroachment; it is anti-solidarist, anti-dogmatic, anti-educationalist. Individualism is a social pessimism, an intelligent mistrust of every form of social organization. The individualist

spirit is, when facing all social creeds, “the Spirit that always denies.” It agrees with Mephistopheles in the second part of Faust:

*Alack! Away! Forbear of yonder squabble*

*‘Twixt tyranny and slavery to babble! It irks me. Scarce ‘tis ended  
when de novo*

*With the whole farce they start again above,*

*Yet none doth mark he is but made a fool By Asmodeus, who the  
strings doth pull.*

*They fight for freedom so themselves they flatter Slaves against  
slaves, if you but sift the matter.*

Taking shelter in his social skepticism and dilettantism, the individualist enjoys, in literature, a whiff of irony and disrespect apt for stinging a ceremonious and pontificating philistine. He delights in thoughts like this one, which is exquisite and shared by Bernard Shaw: “Do not give your children moral and religious instruction unless you are quite sure they will not take it too seriously. Better to be the mother of Henri Quatre than of Robespierre.” Moreover, the individualist has no interest in converting anyone to his side. He gladly takes Barrès’s advice to heart: “It is for nobody to change the way his neighbor feels.” The individualist offers *placita* and imposes no dogma. At most, like Stendhal, he writes to the *happy few*.

Allow me a word or two about the sincerity of the individualist. This sincerity does not emanate from moral scruple, but from personal pride, from a feeling of strength and independence. It becomes apparent that the antipathy of others is only a laughing matter. Sincerity is a sign of strength: “Weak people cannot be sincere,” as La Rochefoucauld says.

One might also say that the individualist’s sincerity is in part reactive, in the Nietzschean sense as discussed earlier. The individualist is sincere, in part, by a contrarian spirit. He loves sincerity and clearness due to his antipathy for social hypocrisy and for those who are its representatives. “My enthusiasm for mathematics might have had its primary basis in my horror of hypocrisy; in my eyes, hypocrisy was my aunt Séraphie, Madame Vignon and their priests.”

The sensibility that is the antithesis of the individualist sensibility: the corporative, solidarist sensibility, is artificial, and always insincere to some extent.

Look at the underside of the corporative mentality: a facade of solidarity covers the vulgar egotism which I distinguished from individualism at the beginning; in this case it is a complicated egotism of servile feelings: envy, mistrust, ill-will, denigration among fellow captives. I know, in a given administration, it is useless to designate functionaries by any other label who talk of solidarity, who read a journal entitled *La Solidarité*. But when a colleague is, whether on the part of a hierarchical superior, the victim of some bad luck or of some well-known misdeed, or if some professional misfortune comes to this colleague (a bad inspector's report, for example), you will see more than one of these excellent colleagues rubbing his hands *in petto* or even showing his gratification by some malevolent hint, when he himself feels safe; that is to say, when the colleague in question has fallen out of favor with management. Reaching for an exaggerated case that to express this corporative spinelessness, I've hit on the following: let's suppose that some brutish department head (not an utterly ridiculous idea) gives one of his subordinates a kick somewhere on his person with an intensity that might reach 30 on a dynamometer, and that he then inflicts this person or that one with the same signs of his attention, but with an intensity reduced to 20, the latter would be delighted, seeing the difference as a sign of favor, as a benefit, represented by the interval between 30 and 20. — "It's better than nothing", as Schopenhauer would say. Is this really an exaggeration?

The union mentality, — another form of the solidarist mentality, — has been defined by a journalist who knew plenty about unions, as a "comrade-consuming altruism." Recently, Buisson reported about the grievances of unionized teachers who naively complained that the president or secretary of the union, or even both, had taken advantage of their elevated position, had stolen the good posts for themselves!

However, there is a body of solidarist thought that is both sincere and serious. This is professed by a certain number of humanitarian and idealist thinkers who love to take the view of the good of the whole ensemble, of society, of humanity. — It is no secret that the universal perspective from the solidarist's point of view is a "universal sociomorphism" (Guyau). To the solidarist, the universe appears as an immense society from which the individual cannot choose to isolate himself. The solidarist is happy believing that every gesture he makes, everything he does, everything he thinks, has repercussions in places as far away as China, Kamchatka, Saturn, Mars and, vice versa, that every gesture, every act of the denizens of these distant lands and stars has its repercussions, as minimal as they may be, on him. To feel this universal dependence, to be gratified by it, to rejoice in it, to exaggerate it at will, is the prerogative of the solidarist sensibility.

"Such feelings," Nietzsche would say, "point to a certain temperament." But, as dear as this sensation of dependency is to a solidarist, it is to the same

degree intolerable for the individualist. The latter shakes off the network of invisible and mysterious threads by which the solidarist encumbers him. He refuses all the solidarists' nebulosity and religiosity. For him, it's plain that there is something false in obsessing over matters of a general nature. He would gladly say, with Sainte-Beuve's Amaury:

*"After all, great world events and things said to be of general interest are translated by each man and enter, so to speak, into him by corners that are always particular to him. Those who speak so splendidly in the name of humanity are drawing, no less than the rest of us, on passions that only concern themselves and private interests that they will deny. It is always, more or less, the urge to climb the pole and be the leader; the drive for fame or power, the satisfaction of crushing an opponent, of getting one over on a rival, of holding to a course until the end, for the sake of applause."*

Here, again, we encounter the insincerity mentioned earlier, from which solidarism finds it so hard to escape. Those who invoke the solidarist philosophy are, most of them, personalities that are grasping and authoritarian, ambitious men for whom the solidarist idea serves as a pretext to extend their control over other men's wills. They forbid isolation to the individualist as against morality. — In vain will the individualist react against it, invoking the inviolability of his self, pushing his gates closed and staying, as the consecrated censure has it, "in his ivory tower"; the solidarist will break through all his entrenchments, will forbid him any "safe haven", any locking away of his self; it will slap a collar on him and compel him to march in the name of solidarity!

All are familiar with the standard solidarist politician. This type is still with us at the time of writing. It has not yet run its course in the remote sub-prefectures. The specialty of the solidarist politician is to constantly remind civil servants that he wants their "social duty" to become "practical" (after-school activities, educating the masses, conferences that are more or less directly party-political in character, etc.). — And our "social duty" has this going for it: it is quite elastic, and it can be pulled and stretched indefinitely. The State, as the supreme incarnation of solidarity, brings it about that a man who has the honor of handling the State's money will never play fair with society. It truly seems that, to the apostles of "social duty", the State's purse is sacred, and worth ten times more than the other kind, and that every State employee, even in exchange for a modest wage, owes all of his time, strength, and thoughts to the public good, to the education of the "masses", to human solidarity, — and, at bottom, to the electoral ambitions of certain gentlemen.

The individualist attitude as we have defined it is, above all, a defensive attitude. The great defensive weapon of the individualist against all social encroachments and contacts is indifference and contempt. — The individualist's contempt is a wall which the individualist, strong in his sense



of uniqueness, raises against his self and that of others. When we dwell inside certain social compartments, it is indispensable for us to enclose ourselves within an armor of scornful impassibility. The individualist's contempt is a will to isolation, a way of keeping his distance, of preserving his intimate being, if not his physical being, from contact with certain things and certain people.

The individualist's contempt is a *reactive* contempt in the sense already discussed. This often means that for the individualist, contempt replaces its opposite: that is, an exaggerated respect for men. As Stendhal says, "I was liable to overestimate others in my youth." He overcame this flaw at a later date. This reverential mania made way for habitual contempt. A much more rational attitude for living in society. — The individualist's contempt is a peculiar kind, in its deliberate focus on "social things", in Vigny's phrase, and those who only live by and for social things. These "social things" are every defined social organization, every hierarchy, every mentality that is collective, congealed, resolved and prescribed, such as the spirit of caste, the spirit of the group, the *esprit de corps*, prejudice, hypocrisy, and the watchwords that govern every social compartment. The individualist's contempt must be distinguished from contempt for humanity in general or the approach of a *Misanthrope* like Alceste; it also differs from *Lorenzaccio's* Romantic contempt for the cowardice of subjugated nations. It is a properly antisocial contempt, a contempt aimed at certain human groups, and, if I dare use the word, at the souls of these groups.

This contempt simulates many degrees of nuance, from Julien Sorel's furious contempt for the nobiliary pride of the La Mole family, — from the bitter contempt of Vallès for his academic milieu, to the nausea that Stendhal felt at the Bourbons' "fetid mud" or the vulgarity of the Empire's generals, assailing each other with platitudes and pocketing fortunes of humiliation in the salons of the Restoration; or even to the "silent" contempt that, for Benjamin Constant, replaces the original surprise and original indignation at the sight of the hypocrisies and pettiness of society. This contempt takes so many guises, from Julien Sorel's famous flourish, "You scum! Scum! Scum!" to Stendhal's reflection that: "Every learned social situation presupposes an unimaginable mass of unimaginable vulgarity and atrocity," or even to Stendhal's point of intense disgust, when faced with the platitudes of a *bourgeois* milieu; "If you will permit me an image as unpleasant as the way this makes me feel, it is like the way oysters smell to a man who is deathly sick from eating oysters". With further life experience, this exasperation of disgust finally gives up, and a grinning contempt is achieved. "I was then mad," wrote Stendhal at a later date; my horror for all that is vile took the form of a passion, but now the court's actions only amuse me..." This mocking and smiling attitude is also that of Madame de Charrière, Benjamin Constant's friend: "All of Madame de

Charrière's views are based on a contempt for all decorum and custom. We mocked everyone we saw to our hearts' content: we became drunk on our merrymaking and our contempt for the human species..."

The most moderate and most common form of the individualist's contempt is his indifference as to the judgments of men. This is the *sperne te sperni*. Stendhal sees in this feeling a primordial condition of happiness and independence. "I would have done nothing for my own happiness, so long as I had not accustomed myself to being disliked by others, as Pascal says. Meditate on this great thought, it is Tracy's best fruit."

With his contempt for opinions in general, the individualist saves his particular contempt for the opinions of certain groups that touch him most intimately, the ones he knows best and whose pettiness, hypocrisy and watch-words have affected him most deeply.

The individualist's contempt for groups stands opposed to the contempt of groups for non-conformists, for unattached people, for illegal migrants, who live on the margins of their world. The contempt of groups is a gregarious contempt dispensed according to prejudice, as dictated by the interests or reputation of the group in question, or at least by what these are believed to be. The contempt of the group is a bitter, vindictive contempt that always hits its target, for, as they rightly say, "individuals often forgive, but groups, never." The contempt of groups is dictated by the group's self-interest. Those who separate from the group, who extract themselves from the *esprit de corps* and stop caring about it, are despised. — The individualist's contempt is disinterested and is shaped only by an intimate hatred of vulgarity and hypocrisy; he is happy to forget about the object of his contempt and he carries a sense of a wide expanse between himself and both what he despises and the desire to keep as distant from it as possible:

*"It's not three days since two bourgeois that I know were about to play out a comical scene of petty dissimulation and quasi-dispute with each other; I walked ten steps away to keep from overhearing them. I have a horror of this sort of thing, which has kept me from getting any experience in such affairs. Which is no small misfortune."*

To sum up the individualist's contempt, let us recall that the individualist is not an a priori denouncer of humanity: he finds exceptions in the scene of generalized vulgarity. He is only a denouncer of groups and group-mentalities.

The individualist's indifference is *reactive*, like his contempt. His impassibility is an acquired impassibility, which for him has become a way of life. His desire is well formulated by Leconte de Lisle:

*Heureux qui porte en soi, d'indifference empli, Un impassible cœur sourd aux rumeurshumaines, Un gouffre inviolé de silence et d'oubli.*

Having characterized the individualist sensibility by some of its more salient traits, we may now ask ourselves with what class of human types this sensibility is most manifest.

It is to Ribot's *sensitif* type that, without contest, the majority of individualists belong. Examples: Benjamin Constant, Vigny, Amiel, to the extent that the latter represents the individualist sensibility. The individualist is generally a *sensitif supérieur*; a contemplative, meditative man, with a skill for social observation and self-analysis.

But the individualist sensibility is also found with this mixed type that Ribot calls *sensitif-actif*. Stendhal was one of these. He did not restrict his egotism to self-analysis. As Stryienski writes:

"If he uses it, it is to keep himself straight in his hunt for happiness; and for him, happiness does not consist in strolling, with a dispirited lethargy, within the enclosed garden of his self: he does not forget to live even while he is contemplating his life. He only gives his soul attention as he must, in order to avoid wasting his talents, gaining every service they can render, while expecting no service they cannot provide. He is sure that without right-mindedness, no happiness is possible. He writes: 'The true art, in everything, from the art of getting eggs from an Indian hen, to painting Girodet's Atala, consists in examining the circumstances of facts with the greatest precision possible.' So, there is your Stendhalian logic, on which so much contempt is lavished. It is, above all, an instrument for action, not contemplation."

Such is Stendhalian egotism. — The individualist sensibility may also be found, although more rarely, among the *actif* type, i.e., leaders in business and politics. With these, action goes hand in hand with a sort of superior dilettantism and a Nietzschean detachment. Read Barrès's portrait of Disraeli:

"If Disraeli, better than any man, knew how to ply society, it was always a game for him, that is to say, a passionate, but disinterested action, all the same! A poet, a dandy, an ambitious manipulator of men, contemptuous Disraeli had the gift of getting his way all the time: he was at the mercy of anything else."

From another point of view, and drawing on a Nietzschean distinction that Seillière has reiterated, we might distinguish between two types of individualists, dominated either by a Dionysian sensibility (impulsive, passionate, unstable) or an Apollonian sensibility (ponderous, harmonious, reflective, culminating in a stoical individualism).

The individualist sensibility, especially its sensitive and impassioned shades, has often been called pathological. This doesn't mean much. For, we always seem abnormal to those who feel differently than we do. The pretense of labeling as pathological a sentimental attitude that one does not share, is a pretense worthy of a moralist. In spite of the social incompetence of which some have accused them, individualists have lived, and have come out of the affair almost as well as the rest have and perhaps even better than others; they have their own hardships and delights; like the rest and even better than others, they have extracted all the savor of their lives, as well as the bitter, and, in the end, they have come to the same point as everyone else. — Why blame them? Why belittle them? Why pity them, which is only an indirect way of belittling them?

In our days, when the social and solidarist sensibility is so triumphant, or, if you prefer, so suffocating, then the individualist sensibility will appeal by contrast. At minimum, it will appeal to those who love to cultivate human exceptionality and “difference”.

## FRIENDSHIP AND SOCIALITY

Here I take the word "sociality" in the rather general sense, as used by certain authors who have made it fashionable. Here, sociality is synonymous with association, solidarity, altruism; it designates the fact of grouping, pressing in, and agglomerating together; it also designates the totality of the feelings which this rapprochement evokes in the consciousness of its constituent unities.

For me, it seems useful to focus a little on the relationship between friendship and solidarity. The effects of each must not be confused, although this has sometimes occurred. An example is found in Sir John Lubbock's *The Pleasures of Life*. On the benefits of friendship, Sir John Lubbock berates Emerson for having misunderstood the two and having maligned friendship:

*"Still I do not quite understand Emerson's idea that 'men descend to meet.' In another place, indeed, he qualifies the statement, and says, 'Almost all people descend to meet.' Even so I should venture to question it, especially considering the context. 'All association,' he adds, 'must be a compromise, and, what is worse, the very flower and aroma of the flower of each of the beautiful natures disappears as they approach each other.' What a sad thought! Is it really so; need it be so? And if it were, would friends be any real advantage? I should have thought that the influence of friends was exactly the reverse: that the flower of a beautiful nature would expand, and the colors grow brighter, when stimulated by the warmth and sunshine of friendship."*

Here, I think, we see a misunderstanding on the part of Sir John Lubbock, who misreads what Emerson wrote. This misunderstanding results from the fact that Sir John Lubbock does not rightly distinguish between the effects of association and those of friendship. The incriminating sentences in Emerson, in Lubbock's view, are in no way applicable to friendship, but only to association, to the "superficial contacts" in Montaigne's words, and what we here call grouping or sociality. On the contrary, Emerson has insisted more than anyone on the differences between friendship and association. He has shown that, if association is too often a cause of debilitation for individuality, then friendship, this mysterious affinity of souls, exalts and vivifies what is most intimate and precious in it. Emerson is as pessimistic about association as he is laudatory about friendship and its impact on the soul:

"He is a dull observer whose experience has not taught him the reality and force of magic, as well as of chemistry. The coldest precisian cannot go abroad without encountering inexplicable influences. One man fastens an eye on him, and the graves of the memory render up their dead; the secrets that make him wretched either to keep or to betray, must be yielded; — another,

and he cannot speak, and the bones of his body seem to lose their cartilages; the entrance of a friend adds grace, boldness, and eloquence to him; and there are persons, he cannot choose but remember, who gave a transcendent expansion to his thought, and kindled another life in his bosom.

What is so excellent as strict relations of amity, when they spring from this deep root? The sufficient reply to the skeptic, who doubts the power and the furniture of man, is in that possibility of joyful intercourse with persons, which makes the faith and practice of all reasonable men. I know nothing which life has to offer so satisfying as the profound good understanding, which can subsist, after much exchange of good offices, between two virtuous men, each of whom is sure of himself, and sure of his friend. It is a happiness which postpones all other gratifications, and makes politics, and commerce, and churches, cheap. For, when men shall meet as they ought, each a benefactor, a shower of stars, clothed with thoughts, with deeds, with accomplishments, it should be the festival of nature which all things announce..."

The difference in the effects of sociality and friendship is explained by the difference in their nature.

Association or sociality is one thing: a vague, anonymous linkage, which is alien to the individual; while friendship is entirely different, a sympathetic bond between two individuals who join together on grounds of intimate affinities of sensibility or intellectuality.

There is something compulsory and artificial in every society. Whether incidental or permanent, and whatever the causes that brought it into existence, (self-interest, constraint, custom, tradition, education, etc.), a society is an intellectual and moral milieu which imposes on the individual and acts upon him with some degree of despotism. Every society, no matter which, cares little for individual spontaneity, and even regards and treats it as its enemy. Friendship, on the contrary, is an essentially spontaneous feeling. Its bonds can be created all of a sudden, like lightning, as with the friendship of Montaigne and La Boétie, or formed slowly by time and absence, by a sort of crystallization, like what is described in the opening pages of *Dominique*, friendship seems to break out from the very depths of the beings that it unites:

*"From an imperceptible seed, from an unnoticed bond, from a "goodbye, Sir", which held no hopes for tomorrow, it (the absence) coped with trifles, spinning them, as it were, into a strong sort of woof, on which two virile friendships may easily rest for the rest of their lives; attachments like these are durable. The bonds thus formed, out of sight, with the purest and liveliest emotional substance by this mysterious artisan, are like an imperceptible ray of light passing from one to the other, no longer fearing anything, neither distance nor time. Time strengthens them, distance can prolong them indefinitely, without break-*

*ing them. In a case like this, regret is only the roughest movement of these invisibles threads attached to the depths of heart and mind, whose extreme tension makes us ache. A year passes. We took our leave without saying good-bye; we meet up again, and during the interval our friendship has made such progress in us that all barriers are lowered, all precautions vanish. This long interval of twelve months, this great space of life and oblivion, have contained not one wasted day, and these twelve months have given you at once the mutual need to share secrets, and the most surprising confidence in one another."*

Emerson also left a very good representation of the spontaneous character of friendship:

*"Need we be so eager to seek him? If we are related, we shall meet. It was a tradition of the ancient world, that no metamorphosis could hide a god from a god; and there is a Greek verse which runs, 'The Gods are to each other not unknown.' Friends also follow the laws of divine necessity; they gravitate to each other, and cannot otherwise."*

While spontaneous, these bonds are for the same reason utterly free ones. They have nothing to do with the petty conventional servitude or the obligations which form the whole ensemble of social strategizing, which aim at the more superficial layers of the individual:

*"Their relation is not made, but allowed. The gods must seat themselves without seneschal in our Olympus, and as they can install themselves by seniority divine. Society is spoiled, if pains are taken, if the associates are brought a mile to meet. And if it be not society, it is a mischievous, low, degrading jangle, though made up of the best. All the greatness of each is kept back, and every foible in painful activity, as if the Olympians should meet to exchange snuff-boxes."*

The banality of such relations offers not even a caricature of friendship; it only presents its antithesis. Sir John Lubbock himself, in spite of the misunderstanding that we discussed earlier, marks the important distinction between friendship and sociality. He says:

*"It is well and right, indeed, to be courteous and considerate to every one with whom we are brought into contact, but to choose them as real friends is another matter. Some seem to make a man a friend, or try to do so, because he lives near, because he is in the same business, travels on the same line of railway, or for some other trivial reason. There cannot be a greater mistake. These are only, in the words of Plutarch, "the idols and images of friendship."*

As feelings go, friendship is essentially particularistic, exclusive, and thus, up to a certain point, antisocial. This delicate contact between souls abhors gregarious promiscuity. Every intervention of the herd-mind assails it and

breaks it up. I have often remarked that, in a conversation where this delicate communication between two intelligences and two sensibilities had been established, the arrival of a third person is enough to ruin all its charm and its strange, sympathetic currents.

The conversation then takes a rapid turn, descending to the vulgarities of everyday social contacts. When this third party comes on stage, everything shrinks and takes an ugly turn. Now there is space for jeering, for slander and wickedness, for worries and vanity, for the hostility that is always on alert within the human heart. Two turn against one. Now we are at the origins of a gregarious coalition. Mistrust, denigration and mockery find an opening. The seeds of all sociality is already present. Sainte-Beuve give a good depiction of the anxiety-producing character of this sudden breakage of mysterious affinities that for a privileged moment had been established between certain chosen souls:

*"I understood that something was occurring at this moment, something was coming apart in my life; and stars were lining up above my head; it was not in vain that at this very time, in this very spot, three beings who had previously missed one another and who doubtless should never have come together, now closed their circle around me. What changes were introduced by this advent of Madame R...! Oh! What we told each other continued to be quite simple and apparently affectionate. To me, in whom all vibrations were hitting their mark, it was clear that the two first sisterly souls started separating with the trembling of wounded doves at first sight of the third one; that this third also felt uncomfortable and trembled as well, although she was mildly aggressive; it seemed to me that the pious union of the newly begun concert then gave way to discord, to painful pangs, and that all four of us would end up writhing and bleeding."*

The whole truth is that these subtle shades of emotion don't really pertain to friendship; they can be caused by other feelings: love, for example; they are so complex that all the feelings and all the powers of the soul seem to participate in it. Be that as it may, no doubt friendship presents a fulfilled and frequent type of this intimate communication of two minds.

These features: spontaneity, liberty, and deep intimacy, make the feeling of friendship an essentially individualistic one. — Friendship is individualistic in the way it appeals to what is most individualistic in the personality, in the fact that it is based on the most intimate qualities and on the deepest individual affinities (often on the contrasts too). Friendship is contrasted with self-seeking, and rightly so: for there is a certain dull and vulgar self-seeking which is the born enemy of friendship. But, on the other hand, friendship carries an intense sense of individuality, a resolute originality of two selves in each other's presence, beneath a certain superior self-seeking that gets beyond the banal ambient sympathy, and goes in search of the being who will reply



to it, who will complete, stimulate, and glorify it. Stirner is right to say in this sense that it is the egoist who is most capable of friendship. On the contrary, the common altruist extends the arms of his sympathy to all of mankind, but he is incapable of attachment to what is most intimate and precious in an individuality. In the closest of friendships, the two selves remain, in each other's presence, completely distinct, at once both bound and opposed to one another. True, Montaigne speaks of this friendship in which "the familiar contacts mix and work themselves into one piece, with so universal a mixture, that there is no more sign of the seam by which they were first conjoined." — But, I think, Nietzsche was no less perceptive when he pointed to the seeds of struggle that remain in friendship, which in friendship is close to what the war of the sexes is in love. "The enemy must be honored in the friend... Can you approach your friend without going over to his side? — In a friend, one must see one's best enemy. — It is when you wrestle with him that you should be closest to his heart..." Even in friendship, and maybe especially in friendship, is manifest the intimate will to power of the individual with the unconscious ascendancy that it exercises on those around it. In *Volupté*, the character Amaury, in reference to the strong personality of count de Couaen, says:

*"I loved him with a friendship that only deepened and joined by the differences in our natures and our ages. Although absent, this energetic man always kept a large part of me with him; at the bottom of his heart I left a bloody tatter of mine, as Milon left strips of his flesh in an oak. And I took shards of his heart into my flesh, too."*

This *wrestling* side of the closest and deepest friendships always excludes suspicion, that characteristic trait of everyday sociality, and wins the noblest confidence in its friend. Men in society are always like the herd of porcupines mentioned by Schopenhauer, who close ranks against the cold, but remain wary of each other's spikes. On the contrary, friendship, by the absolute confidence of amicable hearts, diverges from these gregarious contacts: politeness and good manners, which, in the same philosopher's words, are never more than a compromise between the need for sociality and the natural wariness against beings who have numerous repugnant and unbearable qualities.

Friendship, an individualist feeling, is for the same reason an elective and aristocratic feeling:

*Je veux qu'on me distingue, et pour le trancher net L'ami du genre humain n'est pas du tout mon fait* as Alceste told Philinte, who loves everyone and is the sociable being *par excellence*. On the other hand, the lofty, reserved soul of Alceste perfectly understands what true friendship is.

Elective and aristocratic, as feelings go, friendship is a delicacy. It requires souls of a special caliber, of a particularly robust, delicate, and vibrant metal. In an advanced civilization, its full expansion might require a superior cultivation of intelligence and sensibility. Roberty is right to call friendship an art. In effect, friendship, like art, is a luxury; like art it also implies a process of selection; it chooses its object and also wants to be chosen. Yet, the pleasure of selection is at the root of all beauty and all of its manifestations. Politeness, and what Schopenhauer calls “good manners”, are the small change of altruism. Friendship is made of the most precious substance of the souls whom it unites; it is the adoration of individuality in all its beauty.

Friendship is a principle of individualization; thus it is a principle of aristocratization. Thus it is also opposed to sociality, whose tendencies are conformity and leveling, and the stagnation of intelligence and sensibilities.

The differences between friendship and sociality range as far as the existence of a veritable antinomy, which, moreover, is only one aspect of the functional antinomy that would seem to exist between the individual and society.

In every domain of human activity society tries to reduce, absorb, and subdue individuality. We said earlier that this delicate and intimate communication between souls, which are the elective affections, wither quickly under the gregarious currents.

There is more. It might be said that organized societies, groups, clans or corps, see with jealousy or suspect, to some extent, all such feelings, precisely because they are particularistic, elective, and individual. Roberty is mistaken, I think, when he seems to believe that sociability and elective feelings like friendship and love emanate from the same source and that they corroborate each other. The truth is that they contradict and wage war on each other. Society has always tended to regulate love and to keep friendship under surveillance. The social or gregarious spirit cannot tolerate private affections except insofar as they are subordinated to it. It seems to it that the individual steals something from society when he finds strength and joy in a feeling that escapes social regulation. All it can see is reprehensible selfishness, and theft from society.

Consider those who are imbued with the *esprit de corps*, the spirit of their clan, of their group. Their friendships, if we can call it friendship, are only one aspect and offshoot of the *esprit de corps*. We are talking about camaraderie, relations between colleagues, and nothing more. As long as those whom they call their friends remain in good standing within the group, as long as they commit no act against the group's discipline or etiquette, good relations are maintained. But now suppose that a circumstance sets their friend against

the group; suppose that one of his words or deeds have ostensibly broken the code sanctioned by the society; the friendship is immediately terminated. A recent novel, which is otherwise without great psychological value, provides an interesting depiction of the camaraderie that holds in a community, and which not only differs from friendship, but even suppresses all true friendship. As the author writes:

*"It is a state of genuine isolation: surrounded by men with whom one's relations should never pass the bounds of decorum and whose attention is perpetually hidden, only looking for weak points in their comrades which might be picked at. Here, then, is what we call camaraderie, that famous soldier's camaraderie that is so highly praised. — To live together under the same conditions, to be forced to see each other all the time, to leave the company, to keep up the external forms of elegant politeness, to have to appear together at functions, at the casino and in every possible establishment, now you see what is meant by camaraderie... But what about the need for intimacy, for reciprocal cordiality and the affection that every man should feel for his neighbor, without ever seeking to harm or do a bad turn to them? From this point of view, it turned derisory, this fine word "camaraderie", and so devoid of meaning to boot!..."*

Camaraderie is only a form of the caste-spirit, with its demands, its ostracism, its jealousies, its distrust and its liability to storms. — At the bottom of all camaraderie, and all gregarious sociability, lies a common and fundamental feeling: fear. Fear of isolation; fear of the group and its sanctions; fear of the unknown. Against this unknown, against potential hostilities, help is sought from one's neighbor: "we lock our elbows", in the current expression which so well highlights the needs of cowardly and fearful sociability. Maupassant points to this "suspicious jealousy, this controlling, clinging jealousy, on the part of beings who have met casually, and who fancy themselves chained together...". In an administration of civil servants, this fearful yearning for sociability is dominated by the fear of denunciation, of a bad report. It calls to mind Vergnio's novel *l'Enlèvement*, with the civil servants of the prefecture visiting the right-thinking and well thought of circle where "the Prefecture loved to see them coming in to look over them as a group."

Friendship, an individualistic feeling, ignores these fearful calculations and these associations of cowardice. In friendship, the intimate penetration of individualities excludes this collective duplicity, this mutual lie, which is the law of all social life and which leads the individual to think he is nothing without other people. Emerson rightly mocks this illusion, which is destructive for individuality. He says:

*"Our dependence on opinion leads us to our slavish respect for numbers. The political parties meet in numerous conventions; the greater the concourse, and with each new uproar of announcement of the societies of other cities, the young patriot feels himself stronger than before by a new thousand eyes and arms."*

This is why it is not only with camaraderie, it is with all forms of solidarity that friendship finds itself in an antinomic relationship.

Solidarity is an anti-individualist feeling. The man who acts under the influence of solidarity counts the individual as such as having little importance. The solidaristic sentiments are anonymous, impersonal, and abstract feelings, that is to say, that they are not feelings at all. The exemplification of these pseudo-sentiments are the feelings that lead a person to open their heart to a whole corporation. These feelings constitute the triumph of cliché, banality, of all that is official and all that is false. They are feelings that a high school principal, for example, might feel for his school's gymnastics club, or for the school band that he is about to address, or for an agricultural association or a committee at which he presides or which he is hosting. Every feeling that takes as its object a human herd is necessarily a superficial one, a flower of the soul, so to speak. It loses in depth what it gains in extension.

Solidarity finds its most abstract expression in love of humanity, in what is nowadays called, in a word which Stirner's critique has made popular: humanism. — Thus, humanism is opposed to friendship in the same way and for the same reasons as solidarity. Like the latter, humanism is anti-individualist. Humanism is reverence for man in general, for the human species. But humanism hates the individual. It only recognizes him in order to disgrace him. We might apply to humanism what Stirner says of the Christian love of the Pure Spirit:

“To love the human individual, in flesh and bones, would be nothing more than a “spiritual” love, it would be a treason against “pure” love. Take care lest you end by confusing pure love with that cordiality which amicably offers its hand to everyone; it is precisely the opposite of this, it gives itself sincerely to nobody, it is a completely theoretical sympathy, an interest in man as man and not as a person. The person is unworthy of this love, because they are selfish, because they are not Man, the ideal to which alone the spiritual interest can be attached. Men like you and I are only subjects for the criticism, jeering, and radical contempt of this pure love; for it, as for the fanatical priest, they are only “swine”, or worse.”

And thus, humanism spiritualizes sympathy, removing it from the individual, in a word, de-individualizing it. Humanism is an incursion of the priestly spirit into the realm of feelings. It is a spiritualization of love. It is the glacial cold of the kingdom of Spirit. It is the hardness of the priestly heart or of the nun, who feel affection for nothing except God.

It is by virtue of this great principle of humanism that the individual as such is so mistrusted and hated by these great collectivities which set themselves up as superior moral authorities, and seek to annihilate and absorb him: Society,

the State, etc. They seek to destroy, as far as possible, the private relations between men, what Stirner calls the free “commerce” of individuals, by opposition to society. — In effect, the free commerce between individuals, or egoist commerce, is totally at odds; it is a subtraction from social regulations, the commerce in which individuals only involve each other, as they will, when they will, and for as long as they please; society is something else completely: a crystallization of social relations, a crystallization which freezes the individual into a geometrically given, definitive, and immutable form which is identical for each constituent crystal that belongs to the association. Society opposes to its utmost the free commerce of individuals. Society is like a prison in which the prisoners must not communicate with each other. Stirner says:

*“Prisoners cannot enter into mutual relations except as prisoners, that is to say, only as far as the prison’s regulations authorize them; but to allow them to mingle, of their own accord, with each other, is something that the prison cannot allow. Instead, it must keep such egoist, such purely personal relations, from being established. — If we carry out common tasks, if we work together on a machine, the prison is glad to indulge us. But if I forget that I am a prisoner and I establish commerce with you, who also forget this fact, this puts the prison in danger; this must not be done: this must not be allowed.”*

Friendship might be seen as the exemplification of spontaneous and individual feelings, of this free commerce of the “Unique Ones” as described by Stirner. He says:

*“I, too, love men, but I love them with an awareness of egoism. I love them because love makes me happy, I love because loving comes naturally to me, it pleases me. I am no philanthropist like Rodolphe in the *Mystères de Paris*, the prince of philistines, all magnanimous and virtuous, who dreams of the tortures of the wicked, because the wicked disgust him...”*

Those who are more enamored of isolation, who are more introverted, the stormier temperaments, those who are less pliant to the social yoke, feel friendship more intensely. The solitary Obermann writes to a friend: “You are the point where I love to rest in the anxiety that is my home, you are where I love to return when I have wandered everywhere and where I have found myself all alone in the world.” He often draws a distinction between the horror that social life inspires in him and the sweet intimacy of friendship.

The asocial or antisocial egotist is quite capable of friendship. As cold, dry, indifferent or even hostile to the individual and to individual affections and interests as humanism is, individualism, the *negator* of social entities, remains affectionate, cordial, amicable vis-à-vis individuals. It opens the heart to the free sympathy of individual to individual, which it places in a sphere far above any humanitarian abstractions and the conventional perspectives of contemporary sociability.

# Irony

Irony is an attitude of thought which pertains both to individual and to social psychology. — To be sure, to the latter less directly than the former.

For irony is, from its origins, a rather individualistic feeling. At least in the sense that it requires certain individual dispositions of a special nature and also in the sense that it seems to spring from the most intimate depths of the personality.

It is quite true that irony, as a feeling, is hard to share among a collectivity, and it may well be that it is not enjoyed, or even understood, by the masses or by collectivities. — Meanwhile, irony is also not a social feeling, properly speaking, in light of its object. For, irony may be applied to other objects and used on other topics than life in society. A man may apply irony to himself, to nature, to God. Irony has an infinite range of targets: it may be applicable to all of reality, in the widest sense.

Still, as society is a necessary, unceasing and unavoidable milieu for man, it is natural that those who have a penchant for irony tend to direct their glances at what is closest to their hearts, that is, the society of their fellows. It is social life, its quirks, its absurdities, its contradictions, its strangeness, and its myriad of anomalies, at which the verve of the great ironists takes aim. In observers, theorists, and illustrators of the social lives, this means every kind and shade of irony: whether the misanthropic and wicked irony of Swift, or the scientific and metaphysical irony of Proudhon, or the irony tempered by the smiling and indulgence of Thackeray and Anatole France.

In this complex, undulating, disconcerting, and false milieu that composes the social world, irony is deployed as though this were its preferred terrain.

It is one of the principal attitudes that are possible for the individual in the face of society; it is always one of the more interesting ones. It borders on other attitudes of thought that resemble it without mixing with it: social skepticism, social pessimism, social dilettantism or the disposition to envisage and to treat social life like a game; like a tragic or comic play, like an amusing mirage, disturbing and deceiving, which can be enjoyed on an aesthetic level without taking it too seriously.

It is as an attitude of the individual before society that irony holds any interest for the social psychologist. It is ever-important, prior to analyzing the social causes of irony or the applications that one may thereby make on the stage-play of society, to say something about the general psychological conditions that cause or condition it.

When we look for irony's generative principle, it seems that we find it in a sort of dualism which can assume different forms and bring about various antinomies. Here, it is the dualism of thought and action; there, that of the ideal and the real; as much that of intelligence and feeling as that of abstract thought and intuition.

This last duality forms, as is known, from what Schopenhauer said, the bottom floor of the explanation: the ridiculous. — It's known that, according to Schopenhauer, what provokes laughter is an unexpected incompatibility between the preconceived (abstract) idea that we had of something and the real face that this thing suddenly shows us, which in no way responds to the idea that we had in our heads. — This explanation of laughter sheds some light on the problem of Irony:

*"When someone laughs at what we have done or said in all gravity, it cuts deep, since this laughter implies a huge gap between our concepts and objective reality. The epithet "ridiculous" is offensive for the same reason. Ironical laughter, properly speaking, seems to triumphantly proclaim to a defeated adversary how truly far the thoughts he had nurtured are from the reality as now revealed to him. The bitter laughter that escapes us when a terrible truth is revealed to us, ruining our best grounded hopes, is a vivid expression of the mismatch that we recognize at the moment between the thoughts that have inspired us with a stupid confidence in men or fortune, and the reality which now faces us."*

Thus, laughter and irony would have the same source. But then why is laughter cheerful, while irony is rather painful? Schopenhauer has explained the reason behind the cheerful element in laughter very well; but he has not focused on the element of pain and even of anguish that often whispers through irony. As Schopenhauer says:

*"In general, laughter is a pleasant state. The apprehension of the incongruity between intuition and thought brings pleasure, and we willingly give in to the nervous tremor that this apprehension produces. Here is the reason for this pleasure. From this conflict which suddenly arises between what is intuited and what is thought out, the intuition always wins; for it is not subject to error, it requires no external confirmation; it provides its own guarantee. The ultimate cause of this conflict is the fact that thought, with its abstract concepts, is incapable of the infinite diversity and the variety of shades found in intuition. This triumph of intuition over thought is what brings such joy. For intuition is our primal knowledge, and is inseparable from our animal nature; in it is represented everything that brings immediate gratification to the Will; it is the medium of the present, of enjoyment and joy, and it excludes all painful efforts. The opposite is true of thought: this is the second power of knowledge; its exercise always calls for some, and often considerable exertion; these conceptions often oppose the gratification of our desires, for, as the medium of the past, the*

*future, and of seriousness, they are the vehicle of our fears, our remorse, and all our concerns. And so it must make is quite happy to see this reason, this strict, tireless, and even unwelcome governess, shown to be inadequate. And it is natural that the physiognomy of the face, as produced by laughter, turns noticeably the same as in times of joy."*

Schopenhauer's explanation is correct, and yet it is incomplete with respect to irony.

What makes laughter cheerful, says Schopenhauer, is intuition taking revenge on abstract notions.

But is not irony, which contains something painful, itself characterized by the same failure of these notions? — No doubt, and this is exactly what makes it so painful. But we must note the reason, which, I think, is this: as thinking beings, the failure of thought, of reason, brings us pain. We cannot, although we have done so briefly, get rid of our reason, and we cannot, without anxiety and suffering, bear to see it convicted of falsehood and myopia. In addition, our reason is, in essence, optimistic: naïvely optimistic, confident in itself and in life. It is cruel to us to see this optimism so brutally refuted by the *argumenta baculina* of experience; and that is the source of the element of anxiety and sadness that enters into irony, at least as it is applied to ourselves and to our own fate. — Let us add that reason has more than a theoretical utility; it has a practical side; it serves as a weapon for us in our life-struggle, and it alarming for us to be reminded that this weapon is badly calibrated and might misfire. — Now we see that the source of irony is, like that of laughter, found in this duality of our nature. It derives from the fact that we are at once beings of intuition who feel, and intelligent beings who reason. We gain confidence, by turns and depending on the time, with each of these two parts of our nature, what invites us alternatively and according to our perspective, to celebrate the defeat of our reason (as in laughing) or anguishing over this defeat (as in irony). For, at bottom, when we celebrate the defeat of reason, we are cheering at our own defeat. And this is why irony, which is closely related to sadness and which contains something painful and tragic, is a deeper feeling and suits our nature better than laughter does. The latter is itself tainted by melancholy and becomes the bitter laughter of which Schopenhauer speaks when it mocks our own distress. — As to the distinction made by Schopenhauer between irony and humor, the first as objective (turned on others), the other (humor) applied to oneself, I think this is merely a verbal one. The truth is that irony may be applied to oneself as well as to others. Heinrich Heine's irony is a perpetual playing out of his own distress. The most perfect example of this self-directed irony is the famous passage where the author of the *Intermezzo* recalls how, once when he was healthier, he thought that he was God; but how today, lying in his bed of disease and suffering, he no longer has any illusions of divinity, but on the contrary he makes honorable amends to God and has



great need “to have someone in heaven to whom he can address his moans and lamentations during the night, after his wife has gone to bed”.

The conflict between abstract notions and the intuition is only one aspect of the dualism in which irony takes root. The severance of thought from action, of the ideal from the real, remains close to its precedent and is no less mysterious nor any less upsetting. In effect, what a strange situation we are in, we who are capable of splitting into both actor and spectator in life's drama, who leap for the heights only to fall in the next moment into the servitude and pettiness of real life? It is these “contrarieties” of our nature which had led Pascal to see a sort of transcendental ironism at the center of philosophy. Amiel also sees in this splitting, in this *Doppelgängerei*, a source of irony. As he says:

*“My privilege is to observe the drama of my life, to be aware of the tragi-comedy of my own destiny, and, in addition, to keep the secret of the tragi-comic itself, that is to say, not to be able to take my illusions seriously, to see myself, so to speak, from the theater on the stage, or ‘from beyond the grave’ into existence, and having to feign a particular interest in my individual role, while all the time I am living in the poet’s confidence who plays with all these agents, which seem so important, and who knows all they are ignorant of. It is a strange position, which becomes cruel when pain obliges me to return to my little role, to which it binds me authentically and warns me that I am freeing myself too much by imagining, according to my conversations with the poet, dispensed with resuming my modest job as a valet in the piece. — Shakespeare must have often felt the same way, and I think that Hamlet must express the same thought somewhere. It is a Doppelgängerei, and a very Germanic one, which explains the distaste for real life and repugnance for public life, which are so common with German thinkers. There is, as it were, a degradation, a Gnostic fall, in thus folding one’s wings and withdrawing into the vulgar shell of simple, private life.”*

But the most frequent source of irony is perhaps the dissociation that, in a soul, separates its intelligence from its sensibility. Souls that are capable of such a dissociation are those which are governed by a keen intelligence, which is closely linked to sensibility. As Remy de Gourmont points out:

*“Every original intelligence is made this way; they are the expression, the flourishing of a given physiology. But, by dint of living, they gain the capacity to dissociate their intelligence from their sensibility: this comes about, sooner or later, by the acquisition of a new capacity which is indispensable, although dangerous: skepticism.”*

Ironists are recruited among the sentimental crowd. Seeking liberation from their sentimentalism, irony becomes their tool. But sentimentalism

resists and betrays all its feelings, thwarting the ironist's aims. Others are content with their sentimentalism; they relish it and can never be persuaded to uproot and toss away the delicate flower of sentiment. With people like these, irony provides a veil for their feelings. It is modesty for their passions, for their tenderness, or for their regrets. — There is an enjoyment of a particular kind in these complex states of a passionate sensibility, this self-deprecation or appearing to poke fun at oneself. There is also a source of inspiration there, on which the great artists of Pain, for example Heine, have drawn. Irony can also have a double aspect as one of the two competing powers dominate it by turns: namely, intelligence and sensibility. Irony is the impassioned daughter of pain; but it is also the arrogant daughter of glacial intelligence. She unites in herself two opposite climates of the soul. Heine compares her to iced champagne, since, in her glacial appearance, she contains the most smoldering and headiest of essences.

It is not only between intelligence and sensibility where these conflicts, which create irony, can arise. Heartbreak may also appear in the very center of the sensibility itself, between several antagonistic instincts. The progress of life is of a perpetual war between our instincts. Inside us, all of our aspirations, our sympathies and our antipathies, our loves and our hates are close neighbors who constantly ambush each other. In particular, the individualist instinct tries to kill our social instinct, and vice versa. You are in one of these moments where your contact with Schopenhauer's human hedgehogs makes you turn inwards. Your goodwill as a social animal, repulsed by too much idiocy, gregarious depravity, and the instinct of solitude begins to speak more loudly than the social instinct. You withdraw into an arrogant individualistic stoicism; you raise a barrier between the society of your fellows and yourself; you close your eyes, you cover your ears to the social world like Descartes did to the world of perception; you raise a massive stop sign against all external proposals, and you say, like the poet's character: "Myself only, and that is enough!" But at the same moment a mysterious wave of human sympathy arises in you, an echo of ancient words counseling pity. You too recall having sucked the milk of human kindness, and the need to clasp hands with a lover, to hear fraternal words, sour your voluntary solitude. — And how do things end up? In a terribly piteous compromise between the two warring instincts, a compromise that Maupassant expressed so well:

*"Each one of us, sensing the void all around him, the bottomless void in which his heart beats, where his thoughts struggle, wanders on like a madman with open arms and eager lips, in search of some creature to embrace. He reaches to the right, to the left, at random, without looking, without understanding, just to avoid being alone. He seems to say, as soon as he closes his hands: "Now you belong to me a little. You owe me some part of yourself, of your life, of your thoughts, of your time." And this is why so many people believe themselves to*

*be friends, who are fully ignorant of each other, so many see their hands in others' hands or their mouths on others' mouths, without ever taking the time to look at one another. They must love someone, to keep from being alone; their affections must be spent in love or friendship, but they must love incessantly... And from this haste to be united comes so much contempt, mistakes, and melodrama. And as we remain alone, in spite of our best efforts, so we remain free, in spite of every embrace."*

How can the philosopher fail to see a new theme of irony in the war of the instinct of sociability and the instinct for egotism within us, and in the miserable and precarious compromise that is instituted between the two parties, which forms the framework for our life?

No matter where you turn, you see that the muse of contrasts is the true muse-director of irony. The ironist's intelligence is never a simplistic intelligence. It is necessarily a dualistic, bilateral intelligence, dominated by this *Doppelgängerei* of which Amiel speaks. It poses theses and antitheses, around which this enigmatic genius of irony sports. It moves its center of gravity at will, and thus its center of perspective. This is why irony is light and winged as fancy has it.

The metaphysical principle of irony is now on display. It is found in the contradictions of our nature and also in the contradictions of the universe or God. The ironist's attitude implies that contradiction lies at the bottom of all things, that is to say, from the perspective of our reason, they are based on a fundamental and incurable absurdity. This is as much as claiming that the principle of irony is nothing but pessimism. This *Law of Irony* is an essentially pessimistic conception, which many contemporary thinkers have formulated in nearly the same terms, independent of each other. We find this with Eduard von Hartmann:

*"It may be trivial to point out that the most far-sighted man is incapable of calculating the ultimate effects of his actions. Once the arrow leaves the bow, once the bullet leaves the barrel, once the stone leaves the hand, they belong to the proverbial devil..."*

Later, Hartmann speaks of this general law of history which holds that men only rarely and dimly realize the goals towards which they bend, and that in their hands these goals change into completely different ends. This might be called the irony of nature and it is only a series of tricks played by the unconscious idea.

Amiel focuses on the same thing in several places; he says:

*"Along the way I saw new applications for my law of irony. All ages hold two contradictory aspirations, which are logically opposed but factually associated. Thus, in the last century, philosophical materialism was the champion of liberty. At present the Darwinians are egalitarians, while Darwinism itself proves the right of the stronger. Absurdity is the character of life; real beings are animated contradictions, paralogsms who walk and move. Consistency with ourselves would mean peace, repose and perhaps immobility. The near-universality of humans who only conceive of activity and only practice it under the form of war, whether an internal war of the competition for life, the external and bloody wars of nations, or finally the war within ourselves. So, life is an eternal combat, which wants and does not want what it wants. Hence what I call the law of irony, that is, unconscious self-deception, self-refutation, the concrete realization of the absurd."*

Jules de Gaultier has also, independently, discovered this law of irony, which he has put to such important use in a philosophy which, if not pessimistic, at least seems to be openly hostile to all idiotic, optimistic rationalism, which takes human logic for the norm and the measure of all things.

The social form of ironism is only a particular case of ironism's metaphysical form, whose formula has only just been stated. It is on the social terrain that the law of irony finds its most notable application. Here, again, the source of social ironism resides in the contradictions which swarm about the spectacle of ideas, beliefs, customs, and morals in force with mankind; whether at different epochs, or in a single epoch of human development. The law of irony functions, according to Amiel, without cease in the field of history. The penetrating, undulating, disquiet, and paradoxical mind of Proudhon uncovers irreducible social antinomies everywhere. When he plays with contradictions he is most at home, delighting in the clash of ideas, highlighting antinomies, trying to bewilder the reader and crush him under the oppressive idea that some cruel God is toying with him, and enjoying the spectacle of his creatures struggling amid the contradictory universe into which it has cast them.

But there is a social antinomy which overrides and recapitulates all the rest. This is the antinomy which arises in the diverse spheres of human activity, between the aspirations and demands of the individual on one hand, and on the other, the aspirations and demands of society. If this antinomy holds, then all the dogmatic pretensions of rationalism and social optimism are wasted; only pessimism and social ironism remain. De Couaen, a Romantic figure in Sainte-Beuve's novel *Volupté*, already expressed this law of social irony:

*“There is a law, and probably an absolute order whirling overhead, a vigilant and impeccable clockwork of stars and globes. But as for men like us, these distant harmonies might as well not exist. The hurricane blowing on our beaches has its fabulous place within some greater harmony; but if the whirling grains of sand are capable of any thought, they must necessarily believe that chaos is the only reality... The destinies of men have nothing to do with the energies of their soul. At bottom, this energy is all each of them knows; nothing happens or is undertaken without it; but between it and the development to which it aspires there is an arid chasm, the kingdom of things, the happenstance of location and confluence. If there is a general effect which humanity en masse will fulfill relative to the totality of eternal laws, I won’t lose any sleep about it. Individuals remain unaware of any such effect: they make their contribution unawares, one by falling and another by walking. Who can say that he has contributed more than his neighbor? There is such an infinity of individuals and tosses of human dice contributing to this aim by such divergent compensations, that the end is realized under all apparent contradictions; phenomena perpetually deceive the law; the world keeps turning and man keeps suffering; the species trails along while individuals are crushed.”*

This vivid contrast between the opposition of the destiny of the aggregate to the destiny of individuals contains the seeds of all social pessimism and all social ironism.

It is evident that the philosophy of irony resolves itself into a metaphysical and social nihilism, which might use Amiel’s verse for its motto:

*The void alone can really veil the infinite.*

Nature and society are only a web of contradictions and illusions. Our self does not escape the universal law of irony; it is itself, for itself, a perpetual contradiction and a perpetual illusion. It laughs at itself, at its own uncertainty and its own nothingness.

Here we see appearing the difference that must be noticed between irony and cynicism. Cynicism is a transcendental egotism. Egoism, egoism brought to the absolute, is, as Dr. Tardieu has fully established, the metaphysical principle of cynicism. The cynic takes nothing seriously, if not always his own self, at least his own egoism. For him, the latter is an illusion, but a reality, a reality *par excellence*, the only true reality. Before the ruins of all the rest, the cynic keeps Stirner’s triumphal salutation on his lips: *Good morning, Self!* As for the ironist, he takes his self no more seriously than anyone else does. There is a self-directed irony which is as sincere and deep, if not even more so, than that which is addressed to others and to the whole world. Irony broods over a basis of agnosticism, a painful and resigned hesitation, an anguished *why?* at the bottom of all things; the very doubt as to whether a bottom of all things

even exists; Hamlet's question: *To be or not to be*? Cynicism is a state of mind that is curt and simplistic. It is a vulgar form of the sense of the absolute. Ironism is a nuanced frame of mind. By the splitting, the *Doppelgängerei* that it implies, it is a modality of the sense for the relative.

Cynicism is the inclination of those with lower natures. In Dr. Tardieu's note, it is the path of sensual men, egoists, wicked men, unrestrained or frustrated glory-seekers, cowards, and servile souls. Julien Sorel is a cynic rather than an ironist. Cynicism is a quintessence of self-seeking which implies a lack of nobility in the soul. Irony presupposes a refined and nuanced intelligence, a great sentimental delicacy, a refinement of this sensibility, which is absent in beings who are bluntly and crudely selfish.

For this reason, too, irony is distinguished from laughter. Laughter is vulgar, plebian. According to Nietzsche, no animal gesture is a match for human laughter. This observation is quite apt. Some people's laughter would need to be seen to be believed. — Laughter is gregarious, bestial. It is the happy sniggering of imbeciles exulting in intelligence that came by accident and chance. Laughter is the weapon of cowardly, gregarious coalitions. Ridicule is social bullying against he who finds himself in contravention against prejudice, and who is pushed, for this very reason, to the edges of the herd. The best demonstration of the intellectual inferiority of laughter is the fact that it is always manifested socially. Irony, on the other hand, is an individual's state of mind. It is the flower of disillusion, the funereal flower that blossoms from the solitary contemplation of the self.

The opposite of irony is seriousness, or, in Amiel's term, *pectus*. Still, this is only true in part. For, a deeply felt and intellectually motivated irony itself has something grave and tragic about it. It's quite true that the more serious people, the more passionate ones — passion is always serious — are also the most inclined to irony, when circumstances call for it. Amiel himself furnishes an example of this. He was fully cognizant of the dual nature of seriousness and irony, and preferred the first option. "The reason," he says, "why constant irony repels us is that it lacks two things: humanity and seriousness. It is prideful, placing itself above others... In short, we browse satirical books, but we only cling to those where which contain *pectus*."

Those who find irony unpleasant can also shed light on its nature. As has been said, irony is an essentially pessimistic attitude. Irony appears among those with a profound sense of the hidden disharmonies that lie underneath harmonious surfaces: these avenues and façades of life and society, which have been garnished by a certain optimistic philosophy. The true ironist is he who not only has a developed and abstract perspective of said disharmonies, but also direct experience and personal intuition of them. To be an ironist one must possess a talent for astonishment. He who is never shocked, who

has never, when faced with all that is crude, vulgar and brutish, been seized by this painful stupefaction of which Schopenhauer speaks, and becomes for him the muse-director of philosophy; such will never be an ironist. People like Thackeray and Anatole France have obviously experienced, face to face with the vanity and stupidity of their contemporaries, this convulsion of stupefaction that goes through you like an electric current; otherwise they would never have written these masterpieces of lighthearted, smiling, and biting irony: *The Book of Snobs* and *A Chronicle of Our Own Times*.

Irony is often provoked by an abrupt wounding of the individual consciousness and the social consciousness, by a sudden glimpse of what is stupidly and rashly dishonest in the social simulacra. The individual then finds that these simulacra are unworthy of serious discussion and that all they deserve is an ironic smile.

Irony is thus an individualistic feeling and, up to a certain point, an antisocial one. For, his Mephistophelian smile proclaims the ironist as one who has withdrawn from the world's stage, that he has become a pure observer and that there, from the *templa serena* of pure and immaculate knowledge, he mocks all social fetters, conventions, rites and every kind of masquerade, which, like so many threads, make the marionettes of the social comedy leap and dance. Antisocial, yes, and the ironist is all the more so in his contempt for those prejudices which bear the dignified name of principles. He laughs at the philistine, at Ibsen's man "of immutable prejudices"; and that, reciprocally, he himself is horrified by the Philistine, that is to say, the social being par excellence. This attitude is admirably well described in *Adolphe*:

*"I had contracted an insurmountable aversion for every common maxim and every dogmatic formulation. So when I overheard mediocrity arguing complacently about well-grounded principles of morality, decorum, or religion, things that it was quite content to rank side by side, I felt the need to contradict it, not from opposite convictions, but because I was sick of listening to such firm and weighty convictions... In this way I earned a great reputation for lightness, banter, spite. It was as if by pointing out their absurdities I was betraying their confidence; it was as if by showing themselves to me as they were, they had obtained from me a promise of silence; I was in no way conscious of having accepted such onerous conditions. They found pleasure in granting themselves free rein, and I took found the same in observing them and describing them, and what they called a perfidy was for me only a quite innocent and quite legitimate compensation."*

An essentially intellectual attitude, irony is thereby an aristocratic attitude. The ironist is aware of his superior perspective, where he glides far above the interests and cares, all the scurrying about which weaves the fabric of social life. The ironist is the aristocrat of intelligence, while the philistine is its commoner or it's bourgeois.

Psychologically, one of irony's sources is pride, this pride that Amiel has called, when talking about Chateaubriand, "the giant's contempt for a world of dwarves". This contempt, whatever people may say, is a great intellectual and aesthetic virtue. To be capable of contempt is a great strength and a great superiority, like being capable of admiration. Moreover, these two things go together.

In its individualistic, pessimistic, and aristocratic aspect, irony appears to be an essentially Romantic feeling. Irony is a Romanticism of the mind and the heart. One of the principal Romantic thinkers, Friedrich Schlegel, has set himself up as a theorist of irony. It is well known that this philosopher has understood Fichte's absolute liberty, that is, a supreme disinterestedness, the absolute stripping away of the self, in the sense of an aesthetic dilettantism, an ironism removed from all duty, which already heralds Nietzschean immoralism.

The Romantic heroes: figures like Adolphe, de Couaen, de Camors, are pessimistic and immoralistic ironists, who are always serious and of a truly philosophical breadth, with none of the melodramatic emphasis of Hugo's puppets. Classical eras are disinclined to irony. Nor is the naturalism represented by a popular and philistine art any more interested in it. Ironism seems, then, to remain a typical feature of Romantic art and thought.

In the philosophical domain, ironism is, and this goes without saying, directly opposed to this rationalism, which Schopenhauer called "Hegelian philistinism", who believes in the virtue of ideas and hopes for a future reign of Logic on the earth. In light of this humanitarian and moralizing rationalism, irony is necessarily immoral. In effect, the social and political goal of this rationalism is to use education to mold minds that have no doubts, no nuances, leaving no room for irony or skepticism, but on the contrary, souls which are all cut from the same cloth, are all necessarily dogmatic and Philistine, are all ready to enter the cadres of solid majorities. Against this rationalism, ironism is ruled by the feeling of what is contingent, random, and illogical in human evolution, by the idea of the fallibility of the faculty of reasoning, with its dogmatic pretensions. Against this reason, ironism opposes what Nietzsche calls the "great reason", that is to say, the *dictamen* of physiology, the wishes of the individual's temperament, where the humble origins of our most ethereal ideas are submerged, along with those of our most rationalistic certainties: making sport, when we least expect it, of thwarting our proud wisdom.

Irony represents, as we see, the antithesis of the rationalistic attitude. They differ equally from the critical attitude, which, as Stirner has shown, is only a variety of rationalism. It is an essentially aesthetic attitude. In effect, irony aims at nothing external to itself, neither truth, nor the happiness of humanity; its end-goal is contained within. It comes under the heading of what Nietzsche calls "pure and immaculate knowledge".



The role of the will-to-life is here reduced to its minimum. Even where it subsists, it makes way for the contemplative intelligence, enlightened on the vanity of things and on its own vanity.

The variable proportion of will-to-life and contemplative intelligence that come into irony can serve to distinguish between two varieties of irony: intellectual irony and sentimental irony, or, if you prefer, emotional irony.

Intellectual irony is the kind that derives or seems to derive from contemplative intelligence alone, which is as cold and impassible as it is. Doubtless, this irony has distant roots in the will-to-life, in some native disposition or in some emotional experience, some passion or some experience of disillusionment; but now it seems to be lacking in all emotional or passionate content and having attained to a state of absolute impassibility, to a complete detachment from reality. This is the irony of Flaubert in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. With this artist, the detachment has, at bottom, its counterpart in the adoration — brought to an absolute pitch — of form, and thus the intellectual element is triumphant. Dr. Noir in Vigny's *Stello* also seems to represent this pure, intellectual ironism.

Sentimental or emotional irony is the type in which passion is dominant and incandescent: here a restrained and veiled passion of melancholy, as with Heine, there a violent and savage passion, displayed by Swift (frustrated ambition) with his indignant and vengeful brilliance.

In another point of view, we might distinguish between a spontaneous, unconscious irony and a reflective, conscious irony. The latter is the only one, in all truth, which at first glance ought to bear the name of irony. For, what characterizes irony is a highly lucid, highly conscious intellectuality of things and of itself. Let us never forget that the essential trait of irony is found in this duality of thought that we have mentioned, in this *Doppelgängerei* which splits the conscious being in two, which breaks him, disaggregates him, renders him multiple and inconsistent in his own mind. Yet, this duality might be present in a human being in a spontaneous and latent state before it passes into a state of full self-awareness. André Gide, in his novel *The Immoralist*, has provided a curious depiction of a pathological case of a soul in the path of disaggregation, or rather in the path of transformation and mutation, which plays itself out, both in what it is and what it has; which gradually destroys everything in its life, by a sort of ironism *in action* which it practices unconsciously.

Let us finally indicate the last possible distinction between the varieties of irony. We may distinguish between irony properly speaking, which is a state of intelligence and sensibility, and a sort of practical ironism which consists in making irony into a way of life, bringing irony into one's everyday life and into his relations with men. Léon Wéry, a Belgian writer, thus defines irony,

as a way of life: "Life as irony accentuates and perfects the aestheticism of all latent irony. It creates a living work of art. It plays, no longer with pure thoughts, but with the flesh and bones which give a body to thoughts. The ironist becomes a dramaturge of life itself." But I think that this understanding of irony is rather confused with that cynicism of which Julien Sorel remains the typical example. Irony is essentially a contemplative attitude; it covers a philosophical bedrock: pessimism. Hamlet remains its archetype.

It yet remains for us to appreciate irony and indicate its possible role in the intellectual and moral phase through which we are crossing. Opinions are naturally quite similar on this point. Minds that are strong, nuanced, and multilateral are inclined to see simple-mindedness as an intellectual inferiority and to see a high intellectual and aesthetic value in irony. The eloquent page at the end of his *Confessions d'un révolutionnaire* which Proudhon consecrates to irony is well known:

*"Liberty, like Reason, only exists and manifests itself by the unceasing disdain of its own works; it perishes once it starts worshipping itself. This is why irony has always been the character of the philosophical and liberal genius, the stamp of the human mind, the irresistible instrument of progress. Stationary peoples are all somber peoples: the man of the people who laughs is a thousand times closer to reason and liberty than the anchorite who prays or the philosopher who argues.... Irony, the true liberty! You are the one who delivers me from the ambition of power, from the servitude of parties, from the respect for routine, from the pedantism of science, from the admiration of the great personalities, by the mystifications of politics, from the fanaticism of the reformers, from the superstition of this great universe and self-adoration. Sweet irony! You alone are pure, chaste and discrete..."*

Stirner also celebrates the absolute liberty of the ironist, that is to say, of the owner and his thoughts:

*"As the owner of my thoughts, I would doubtless cover my property with my shield, just as the owner of things does: I don't let the first-comer take whatever he wants; but I will smilingly welcome the outcome of the battle, with a smile I will lay down my shield on the corpses of my thoughts and my faith, and smilingly I will triumph when I am beaten. This is precisely where the humor of the matter lies."*

Remy de Gourmont, for his part, says:

*"There is nothing durable without irony: all the novels of yesteryear that are still read: The Satyricon and Don Quixote, The Golden Ass and Pantagruel, have been preserved by the salt of irony. Irony or poetry, everything else is blandness and platitude."*

On the other hand, all simplistic and dogmatic minds abominate irony. Many look upon it, as with its companion pessimism, as an intellectual defect. But, in effect, we are far too apt to label as *morbid* any mode of feeling or thinking that we ourselves do not practice. From the perspective of the rationalist, the dogmatist and the optimist, the ironist is, along with the pessimist, a bitter soul, a man of frustrated ambition or sentimentality, or even a sickly, neurasthenic person. All that is convenient; but none of this means or proves anything.

If we were to turn the tables on the dogmatists and optimists, pointing to their good health or their relative success in life, or other conditions or circumstances that might lie behind optimism, it would be equally pointless. In addition, we may also note that plenty of people who get along and are fortunate enough turn out pessimists and ironists, while others of dubious health or fortune are resolute optimists; and there we have, doubtless, yet another application of the law of irony.

All we can do is point to the existence of these different categories of intelligence without judging the value of the metaphysics that they create. Let us merely say that in our age of excessive social and moral dogmatism, and every sort of evangelism and moralism, irony plays the part of a useful counterweight and it should be welcome to every mind that would remain disinterested.

## TWO TYPES OF IMMORALISM

Upon close examination of the writings of the thinkers who are generally called “immoralists”, it becomes apparent that two possible ways to be an immoralist.

To draw this distinction, we will pay attention to how these immoralists have seen the influence of morality on behavior. — A first way of being an immoralist consists in maintaining that its influence is very weak, negligible, or even completely futile. — A second way of being an immoralist consists in attributing to it a strong power over the mind, a powerful influence over behavior and life, but also to maintain that this influence is harmful, tyrannical, and odious: to rebel against it and to furiously shake it off like an unbearable yoke. — In the first case, the powerlessness, inanity, and, as it were, the unreality of morality is focused upon; in the second case, the focus is its harmful impact. In the first case, morality is treated with contempt, as a triviality; the second aims to exorcize it, as if humanity were possessed and tormented by some powerful and destructive demon.

It is clear that these approaches to immoralism contradict each other. For, if morality is powerless, indifferent and inoffensive, it is pointless and ridiculous to inveigh against it.

We will try to characterize these two types of immoralism; to see what sort of sensibility and intellectuality correspond with them, and also what relative truth they might contain.

The definition we have given of the first kind of immoralism is a very general, and consequently a somewhat vague definition. It will be clarified by the presentation of the particular conceptions that fall under this rubric.

The father of immoralism in the first sense is the French philosopher Bayle, who, from 1682, in his *Diverse Thoughts on the Comet* and his *Critique générale de l'Histoire du Calvinisme du père Maimbourg*, advances the thesis that morality has no more than an insignificant influence on the conduct of the individual; that in the end, man always follows the mandates of his temperament. In the table of contents of *Diverse Thoughts on the Comet* one finds sections like the following: “We must not judge the life of a man, neither by what he believes, nor by what he publishes in his books...” “Man does not live by his principles...”; or this one: “Middling passions, easy to repress.” — Morality can do nothing unless temperament is its accomplice. It triumphs when it commends chastity to a frigid temperament. Bayle says somewhere that Saint Augustine professed a very indulgent morality concerning the use of women, when he still maintained his aptitude for enjoying them. When

age took away his desire for them, he found it easy to refrain, without the assistance of morality.

Fourier takes morality no more seriously. In his book *The Theory of Four Movements* he maintains that vices are our only motives and that it is impossible to bridle them. In his words, "Long ages of degeneration were necessary to establish monogamy, that regime so contrary to the interests of a vigorous people; and, besides, nobody submits to this law when it becomes tyrannical." When morality governs the passions it is like that barbarian chief to whom the king of England addressed this question: "Do your subjects really obey you then?" — The leader responded: "Why should they not? I obey them quite well." Fourier adds elsewhere that:

*"Morality is very mistaken to grant itself some self-subsistent existence; it is plainly superfluous and powerless as part of the social mechanism; for, on every question on which it claims some power, such as theft, adultery, etc., politics and religion are already sufficient to determine what is suitable within the established order of things. As to any reforms to be undertaken in morality, where religion and politics fail, morality will fail all the more quickly. What would it be among the body of the sciences, if not a fifth wheel; impotence in action? — Every time it finds itself fighting alone against some vice, it is certain of defeat; it is like a bad regiment that always lets itself be routed, and should be dismantled in dishonor..."*

Fourier's conclusion is that an intelligent society would cease to compensate the professors who teach morality.

Stendhal's stance on morality is well known. In *The Red and the Black*, and his other novels as well, he always makes his heroes and heroines obey their temperaments. Through all his works one finds a fundamental theme which has been called "Beylism" or the "theory of virtue as timidity". Stendhal misses no opportunity to ridicule morality and the pitiful means to which it resorts in seeking converts. When Fabrice is in the prison of the citadel of Parma and enormous shades are set in front of his window, leaving no scrap of sky visible for the detainee, the jailer says that it "is done for morality's sake: to increase the salutary sadness of the inmates' souls, and their desire for self-correction."

In his philosophy of history based on the idea of race, Count Gobineau singles out the historical role of religions and moralities for ridicule. He wages war on the age-old faith which consists in the belief that peoples have no goal other than to realize moral ideals. In his *Essay on the Inequality of Races*, he grants to the various moral systems, religions, and social dogmatisms only an insignificant influence on the duration of institutions. He holds that fanaticism, luxury, wickedness, and irreligion do not necessarily lead to the

collapse of societies, that Christianity neither created nor transformed the aptitude for civilization. Mind, intelligence, and will vary with the race in question, but the role of education is always infinitesimal.

As for the moralists, Count de Gobineau only has contempt that recalls Fourier's. In his introduction to the *Nouvelles Asiatiques* we read the following:

*"Among those who devote themselves to examining human nature, the moralists have been in the greatest hurry to draw conclusions from fine appearances; there they halt, consequently losing themselves in their phraseology. One may fail to really notice what the point of the moralists is, what purpose this parasitical sect has ever served since it first appeared, and the endless criticism it has earned by the inconsistency of its point of departure, the incoherence of its remarks, and the silliness of its deductions; it might well be able to rank, for some centuries now, its adepts among the pretentious braggarts who talk for the sake of talking, who line up long words only for the sake of hearing them said. Among the non-values given to the world by the moralists, there is no more perfect axiom than this one: 'Man is everywhere the same.' This axiom goes hand in hand with the pretense of these self-proclaimed thinkers to fix the wrongs of humanity, by making the latter admit their wise counsel. They have never stopped to ask how they might actually succeed in changing the human mechanism, which creates, presses, directs, exalts the passions, and determines harms and vices, the only definitive cause of all that occurs, both in the soul and in the body."*

Maurice Barrès, under the *Jardin de Bérénice*, contrasts the bookish, scholarly and pseudo-scientific morality as represented by the engineer Charles Martin, with the sure, delicate and charming instincts of Bérénice. It is important to note that Barrès' thesis is not to reject the morality of the capacity for reasoning as harmful or dangerous, but rather to show how vain and impotent it is to modify our deepest instincts. In the melancholic evocation that draws the novel to a close, Barrès makes his dead Bérénice say:

*"It is true," she said to her friend Philippe, "that you were a little rude to try and trade your conception of harmony for nature's logic. When you preferred to have me as Charles Martin's wife instead of the servant of my instinct, you fell contrary to the Adversary who wanted to substitute our marshes, full of fine fevers, for some carp-filled pond. But don't be upset. Doing the wrong thing is harder than vanity suggests. It is unlikely that you have traded your intentions for nature's mechanism. I have remained the same, though in a new form; I have never ceased to be the same unsatisfied person... I cried in solitude, but I may have been after consolation: you pushed me into Charles Martin's arms only to make me cry all the more. In this sketch of the life of a dishonorable little girl, consider both your own heart and the way of the world."*

How remarkable! Immoralist notes are even heard in the choirs of moralism, both religious and secular. — It has become commonplace among Christian moralists to belittle the power of the passions and the weakness of moral restraints. In Christian morality, this casuistic represents a concession coerced from morality, an adjustment of moral commandments to the demands of our corrupt nature. Hence the severity of rigid moralists with the Jesuit morality: that they take a relaxed attitude to morals: that is to say, that at bottom it is a *moral immoralism*.

In a recent study entitled: *l'Inquiétude de notre morale*, a contemporary thinker in whom we cannot fail to see a moralist, Mæterlinck expresses his lack of faith in the power of ideas. He says:

*"In its greatest need, humanity requires no guide. It runs a little more slowly, but almost no less surely on a moonless night... It is, so to speak, independent of the ideas which consider themselves its guides. As it happens, it is both odd and easy to see how little influence these occasional ideas have on the sum of good and evil that occurs in the world... Do we need to recall a decisive example? In the middle ages, there were moments where faith was absolute and imposed with a certainty that corresponds exactly to our scientific certainties. The rewards promised to the good and the punishments threatened against wickedness, in the minds of these men, were tangible, so to speak. Yet, one fails to see any increase in the level of goodness. A few saints sacrificed themselves for their brothers, and possessed certain virtues, among more debatable ones, including heroism; but the mass of mankind continued in self-deception, lying, fornicating, stealing, envying, and killing each other. Their average level of vices was no less than ours..."*

Several contemporary novelists have, with fine analyses, shed light on how unstable, precarious, and finally unreal the moral conscience is. This is what André Gide asserted, whose novel *The Immoralist* is an analysis of a curious case — pathological, it has been called, but are we so sure? — of a mutation, and, as it were, of an inversion of the moral conscience which comes upon the protagonist after an illness and a return to health which upset his physiology:

*"Nothing could be more tragic for a man who expected to die than a long convalescence. After that touch from the wing of death, what seemed important is no longer so; other things, which had not seemed important, or which one did not even know existed, became so. The layers of acquired knowledge flake away from the mind like paint, here and there leaving visible the very flesh of the authentic creature who had been hidden underneath. From this point it was he whom I claimed to discover: the authentic creature; the "old man"; he whom the Gospel had repudiated; whom all around me: books, teachers, parents, and I myself, had tried to suppress..."*

Such is also the Norwegian novelist Johan Bojer with his strange novel, *The Power of a Lie*, where the work of imagination is analyzed, by which the characters bend the facts to their feelings and do horrible things, all the while guaranteeing themselves a clear conscience.

Psychological analyses like this one can serve to illustrate Georges Dumas's fine study "*Les Conditions biologiques du remords*". There it is demonstrated that a single caffeine injection was enough to change an individual's moral conscience and destroy all his scruple and remorse. We may join the author in posing a question which, moreover, is only of interest to psychophysiology, since he does not claim to resolve it from the ethical perspective:

*"The state of depression and fatigue is favorable to the flourishing of remorse... Then, all the social prejudices rain down on the distressed soul until it is submerged; it turns and returns to them seeking nourishment... Since, then, remorse is the sign that the social prejudices, or, if you prefer, our moral habits, have defeated our instincts, and since this victory occurs most often during states of depression, it seems that one might conclude that the healthy life is naturally immoral, while disease, weakness, and morality are naturally associated."*

All of these views are enough to show the nature of the first kind of immoralism. This immoralism, across all the shades that different thinkers have explored, consists in pointing out the fragility, the caducity, the psychological and social inefficacy of our morality; it's very limited, if not completely null, impact on our behavior and way of life.

Moreover, it seems that, in the writings of the immoralists we have just studied, the object under discussion is actually the *received* morality, the morality that is more or less codified and formulated, the current morality that we inhale with the air, the morality which has the approval of mankind, or a sizable portion of mankind, in its favor. It does seem that in the nature of things, instinct, feeling, the spontaneous side of life, are not in dispute and that, even for the immoralists, they retain their imprescriptible rights as guides for the inner man.

What, then, is the idea that dominates immoralism? It seems to be what might be called the "irrationalist" idea: the idea and the sense that life infinitely surpasses in richness, in variety, and the ability to surprise, every codification of our morality. What is most revealing as to the weakness of this morality, what restricts its influence in the current of life, is the fact that we know the world too little for us to claim that our moral order is necessary to its proper functioning, or to be sure that life would be any less rich or fine if we permitted that which is currently forbidden. As one character in Bojer's novel says, "life is larger than any human law telling us what is just and what



is unjust." No moral formulation can adequately capture life, as elusive as it is, like the river *Ameles*, whose water, Plato says, could not be retained in any vessel...

We now come to the second type of immoralism, whose representatives are Stirner and Nietzsche. Contrary to those thinkers who harbor the preceding attitude, Stirner grants an enormous role to morality in human affairs, and an extraordinary influence on the conduct of life and the happiness or misery of humanity. Doubtless, to warn mankind all the better about what he calls its "haunting", for him, the power of moral ideas cannot be overemphasized. There is no room for irony on a theme that is so close to his heart. He takes morality and the moralists seriously in the extreme. He stands aghast before the phantoms, the "revered personalities" who populate the kingdom of Spirits and desperately defends the independence, uniqueness and instantaneity of his self against them. The combative expressions return to the lips of this athlete whose muscles are tense, whose features are contracted: "The crude fist of morality," he says, "bears down without mercy on every noble manifestation of egoism." This brutal wrestler is able to find tones of trembling and indignant pity to allow him to sympathize with the innocent victims of morality. His famous, touching passage about the young girl who so painfully sacrifices her passion to morality, is well known. — Stirner, like Corneille, chronicles the wars of passion and duty. But, whereas Corneille exults in the triumph of duty, Stirner execrates this victory; he insults the victor and furiously rallies the defeated instinct, inciting it to fresh rebellions.

Nietzsche's attitude is not far from Stirner's. In Nietzsche we re-encounter Stirner's abhorred Phantom or Phantasm. The author of *Daybreak* says:

*"There are people who do nothing their whole lives for their Ego, only acting for the benefit of the phantom of this Ego, which has been formed, according to their superficial aspects, in the minds of those around them, and which they have then accepted ready-made from the hands of their fellows, as if it constituted their true personality. Thus, they inhabit a strange world of phantasms, and an analogy gathers all these men who are unknown to themselves: that they believe in this fictive and bloodless thing, man in the abstract, having never been able to set a true Ego forged by themselves, against the pale dream-image that they would annihilate by showing themselves what they really are."*

Like Stirner, Nietzsche wages war on borrowed or imposed values. "Our measures of value are either our own or they are borrowed, but the latter kind are much more numerous. So why do we accept them? From fear, from a timid fear of those who formed, or rather de-formed, our childhood." — He shares Stirner's fear of the tyranny of the kingdom of Spirits and the possible "congelation" of his uneasy cogitations. "Against our overly despotical convictions," he says, "we must become noble *betrayers* and practice

light-hearted infidelity... To this effect, let us be ‘thinking snowballs’, forever growing and melting as we roll along the terrain of ideas...” And the blazing lyricism of Nietzsche’s deliverance-song, on the occasion of his ultimate escape from the yoke of ideas, is well known.

Let us now try, briefly, to specify the differences between the two kinds of immoralism.

The first sort of immoralism is more a psychological thesis than an ethical theory. This thesis is the conclusion of an inquiry led by psychologists, by historians, by analysts of human nature who thought they had observed a lack of influence of moral ideas on the conduct of individuals and on the lives of nations. Immoralism understood in this way is an attitude of pure intellectualism, which is happy to escape the ethical part of the matter.

The immoralism of the second class is an ethical theory. We might call it an adversarial ethics. It is no longer a purely intellectual attitude, but a combative, rebellious, and insurgent one. When he shouts anathemas against the Priestly Spirits, Stirner assumes the stance of an exorcist. He so hates Spirit, Idea, and other ethical entities that he feels the need to accept their reality so that he can breathe his fury against them all the more readily. — Bayle believes so little in the power of morality that the thought would never occur to him to get upset about it. To attack it would be to push against an open door. But when Stirner and Nietzsche attack morality, they seem eager to move mountains, to defeat Jacob’s angel, or even to fight Don Quixote’s windmills.

The first kind of immoralism, as a psychological thesis, comprises various degrees, nuances and reservations. Among those who profess it, some consider education and morality extremely weak in their influence, true enough, but this is not the same as saying it has no impact at all. To measure this influence is a problem of mental dynamics which they might have to consider. — The second kind of immoralism, since it is mainly an ethical theory, has an absolute character. — Stirner attacks all education, all morality. He seeks to hollow out Spirit completely, in the name of egoism.

The first sort of immoralism, as a psychological thesis and as an intellectual attitude, is not necessarily antisocial. — No doubt, this immoralism can lead naturally enough to egotism; but to a more theoretical egotism, limited to the cultivation of the Self, a thinker’s egotism, for whom society and his Self are objects of contemplation. In this hypothesis, the morality which expresses society’s wishes is so unreal, so little cause for concern; it has so little importance for his *inmost self*! — From this perspective, we might rightly join Remy de Gourmont in placing morality on a level with fashion, as something that everyone obeys to keep from standing out, but which has no interest for the intimate Being, and for which nobody makes any great

sacrifices. — Besides which, the immoralist thinker sets himself up with a strong disliking for the judgment of others. “One must,” says Maurice Barrès, “present a smooth surface to men, present them with a semblance of oneself, and remain absent.” The second kind of immoralism is manifestly antisocial. In effect, it grants as much importance to society as it does to morality. For Stirner, the social institution, the guardian of morality, is especially odious because it takes on the sacred character of the latter. The whole apparatus of social policing, all the “revered personalities”, Law, State, Homeland, represent formidable, crushing powers for Stirner, which inevitably inspires the revolt of the Unique Ones.

Which of the two conceptions is a more correct expression of psychological, ethical, and social truth? I think that the answer must vary with the individuals concerned.

There are weak, credulous, timorous, and apathetic natures who lack grand ambitions and great passions, who have little need for independence, who lack innate resilience. For natures like these, the Stirnerite conception is psychologically correct. Education and morality have a strong grip on them.

And yet, the Stirnerite conception is ethically false for these natures; for, precisely because they are without contrasts and without personality, these souls are almost unperturbed by external discipline, and with them the call to Stirnerite rebellion rings hollow; it finds no echo in them.

There are other natures, rich and strong, capable of intense passions, and at the same time sufficiently intellectual to keep from falling for the lies of society. With these more vigorous natures, the hooks of education and morality are only skin deep, and for them, Bayle’s idea is psychologically true.

But there is also an intermediate category, which might be the most numerous and most interesting, in light of the psychological drama in which the show is performed. This incorporates all souls who feel both strong passions and an intense sense of duty. It is with the likes of these where the Cornelian and Stirnerite battle between passion and duty appears. These souls have been tossed about and upset, and they gain Stirner’s special pity as morality’s prey. We must not forget that the ethico-psychological problem is complicated by an important factor: the social and even economic factor.

Since morality would be quite feeble if reduced to its own forces, a host of social influences throw their weight behind it: the power of opinion, the fear of prejudice, our hierarchical superiors, all the people on whom we depend, and the whole social organization, which is always ready to crush the weak and the isolated at the least infraction, at the first word or deed that offends its prejudices. — Morality receives help from these auxiliary troops which

it definitely needs, and it is social policing more than morality which strikes the independent and the disobedient with “its rude fist”.

Stirner realized this fully. His rebellious pity embraces the economically vulnerable, those who depend on their neighbors’ consideration to live and eat, and those whom, being dependent, are compelled to count on all the Tartuffes of morality.

In our society, money grants independence with respect to morality, as it does with respect to every other kind of servitude, and this is why the immoralists would do well to imitate Philippe, in the *Jardin de Bérénice*, when this sympathetic character, seeking to cultivate his Self in peace and liberty, resolves to set things in motion to obtain, from the head of state, a concession in the form of a horse-racing track out in the country.

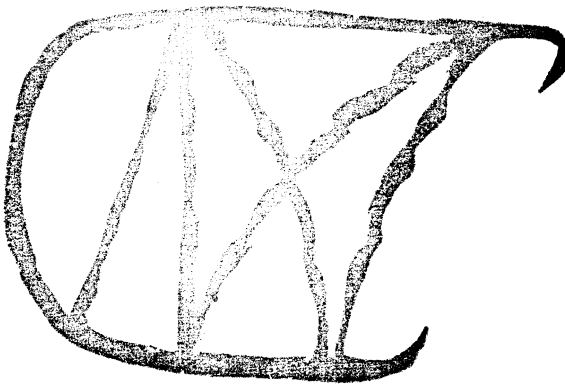








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